

IRREPRESSIBLE HOPE

IV. “Built Together”

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I Peter 2:1-12

TEXT: *In Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit* (Eph. 2:22).

INTRODUCTION

The Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem is built over the traditional site where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. Several Christian denominations share the basilica, including the Eastern Orthodox, the Greek Orthodox, and Armenians— all jealously guarding their territory and “rights.” The Orthodox churches observe a different schedule for Easter and Palm Sunday than do the Western churches. Two weeks ago was the Orthodox Palm Sunday. In the midst of the service fight broke out between dozens of Greek and Armenian priests along with worshipers entering into the melee. It erupted when Armenian clergy kicked out a Greek priest from their midst, pushed him to the ground and kicked him. According to the Armenians, the Greek priest was trespassing on their territory. Worshipers were pummeling each other with the palm fronds handed out for Palm Sunday.

How does that make Jesus feel, who loved the church and gave Himself up for her (Eph. 5:24)? In Jesus’ longest recorded prayer, the night of His betrayal and arrest, He prays, *may they be brought to complete unity* (Jn. 17:23). Unfortunately, most of us can think of distressing examples of the failure of the church to live up to its calling. They may not be as graphic as what happened in Jerusalem two Sundays ago, but nonetheless they are distressing.

Seldom does the church seem to live up to our expectations. The descriptions Scripture gives of the church are glorious and awesome. Paul's favorite metaphor is that we [the church] *are* the Body of Christ. We collectively, as the church, give shape to Jesus’ life and ministry in our current situations. The world should be able to look at church and see Christ present and at work. Another favorite metaphor of both Paul and Peter is to refer to the church as a building— not a physical structure, but *built into a spiritual house* (1 Pet. 2:5) as Peter says in this morning’s Scripture. Paul, using the same metaphor in Eph.2:22 gives a succinct summary of what Peter expands upon here, so I’ve chosen it for our summarizing text:

In Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

What a word picture. Christians together become a place in which God is alive, visible, powerful, and present in this world. In other words, if people want to know about God, or what He is like, or need help from Him, the church is where it is at— God's people gathered together making Him real, personal, and visible. Author Dallas Willard captures this in [The Spirit of the Disciplines](#), when he says,

“Personalities united can contain more of God
and sustain the force of His greater presence

much better than scattered individuals.”

I hope that has been your experience of the church. But, I've had enough experience with people and the church to know it well may not be your vision of the church. Please be aware, there is one church and all our individual congregations are not "the church" but merely parts of it in a variety of manifestations. And calling it a church doesn't make it a church. I meet a lot of people who feel disappointed in what they've experienced of the church. Some have been hurt deeply by a church and feel their wounds are beyond recovery, or they are unwilling to try church again. Maybe they've been beat over the head with a few palm fronds, or worse. Some have just given up because of frustration. Or they may attend, but are keeping involvement at arm's length because of previous hurts. If you're there, many of us here can identify with all those feelings. I know I can. I too have often been disappointed or frustrated with the church. I too have been deeply hurt by people in the church. But, I have not given up on the church. On the contrary, I am driven by hope to keep working at being a part of the church, for it is God's plan, and His only plan for bringing forth the Kingdom of God on planet earth.

I want to share some of that hope and vision from Peter's teaching. In spite of intense suffering on the part of these believers Peter is writing to, he exudes words of hope and confidence. Hope in Peter's use is a solid standing upon and living in the promises and faithfulness of God. It has little to do with present circumstances, but everything to do with our confidence in God. Here, Peter clarifies a vision of the church these early Christians need and one we need to keep before us as well. It is easy to criticize the church, for there is much lacking and much that is wrong. But that is true of any organization with people involved. I want us to focus upon how we build the church and help it become all it is intended to be.

A BUILDING

When Alexandre Gustave Eiffel designed and built his tower for an international exposition in 1899, the structure was called monstrous by the citizens of Paris. There were demands to tear it down as soon as the exposition was over. After all, what practical use was there for it? But the architect loyally defended his creation from those who wished to destroy it. He knew it was destined for greatness. And, of course today, the Eiffel tower stands as the primary landmark of Paris.

The church has many detractors, but we are struck by Jesus' loyalty to it. He believes in the church, even if we don't. Those early disciples seemed an unlikely lot to entrust the continuing work of Christ to. But Jesus prayed for them and gave them the power of the Holy Spirit. And today, the church in all its ineptness and imperfection continues to be the primary means God chooses to use to bless our world. It is destined for greatness that will be fully realized when Christ returns. In the meantime, with all its problems and weakness, the church continues to be God's chosen instrument.

Peter's choice of the metaphor of a building is perhaps understandable when we consider his confession of faith in Mtt. 16:13-19—

To Peter's, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

"Upon this rock"—the foundation of the church is the confession of faith in Christ as Son of God. When the church abandons that foundation, it is no longer the church. Peter here in our text pictures Christ as the cornerstone of this building.

The foundation is the most critical part of any building. The building can't be more than the foundation will support. I've been to cities where they are building a skyscraper, and I find it fascinating to look at the huge, deep hole they are digging. Then, beyond that, they are driving deep pilings to support the tremendous structure. Our foundation is the strongest possible in Jesus Christ. It goes deep, even reaching to the foundation of the world—the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). Can you think of anyone better to support the work of God? But in everything we do, we need to constantly return to this foundation, to be sure it is set solidly on The Rock, Christ Jesus. His life and His teachings are the bedrock on which everything in the church must rest. Our personal actions and living, as well as those of the church, must fit with Jesus.

Then, Peter extends the metaphor to each of us being "living stones." This speaks of place and function, but not rigidity. "Living" means there is change and growth. Remember, stones placed in a building hold each other up, support each other and are supported by others. Christianity is not a solo affair—it is always relational. Christ places us in the church where He wants us. We may want to pick our place in the structure, but He's the architect. Imagine these "living stones" saying: — "Not next to her!"
 – Or, "No one will ever notice me there."
 – Or, "I might get kicked here or spit on over there...."

In a little book my brother wrote of letters to a friend with the made-up name, Gunnar, he addresses this. Gunnar has just returned to the church after many years away, wandering in a spiritual wilderness.

"Well that didn't last long, did it? I mean your romance with the church. Did you so easily forget that it is *sinners* that God calls to repentance, and that a lot of them, having heard the call and decided that they like the sound of the good news of salvation, somewhere along the way ditch the repentance part? And you find yourself involved in a company of friends to whom you are not feeling very friendly?"

"You say that you have almost nothing in common with these people. But isn't that just the point? *You* have nothing in common with them; but *God* does. This just happens to be the way that God goes about making a kingdom, pulling all sorts and conditions of people together and then patiently, mercifully, and graciously making something of them. What he obviously does not do is pre-select people who have an aptitude for getting along well and enjoying the same things. Of course you don't have much in common with them. The church is God's thing, not yours."

CLEAN HOUSE

It is for this reason, Peter began this chapter with

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:1-3)

In case you've wondered what breaks down the fellowship and community the church is designed by God to reflect, Peter gives a list of five sins that disrupt harmony. Let's probe a little deeper what these words mean.

Malice– The Greek word here is a general word for wickedness– sins that hurt and injure others.

Deceit– Also translated, “guile.” The Greek word means “to catch with bait.” It refers to deception that is aimed at attaining one's own end– a hidden agenda.

When we were in our last church, in Ohio, there was an amazing true story of the tragic consequences of deception. This happened in Perrysville, a town a little smaller than Okanogan, about 30 mi. away from us. They had one town policeman– the Chief of Police, of course. He was in the police garage, looking at his 9 mm rifle, “messing with the laser site,” and the rifle accidentally fired, shooting a hole in the windshield and headrest of the cruiser. Embarrassed and fearing the reaction of the town council, he came up with a plan of deception. He went just outside of town, made tracks in the grass with his cruise to look like he'd pulled someone over. Then, as he made the call on his radio to the Sheriff's office, he fired his pistol into the ground to make it appear there was trouble at the scene. But, the police chief accidentally hit the magazine button which caused the gun to eject the magazine. While replacing the magazine, the police chief accidentally shot himself in the leg. He then claimed he had stopped a car without license plates and the windshield of the cruiser was shot-out as well as himself being shot in the leg.

Receiving the call for assistance and hearing the gunshot over the radio triggered a massive response. Law enforcement officers are extremely motivated when a fellow officer is in distress. There were 43 officers that responded– from sheriff's departments in two counties, the highway patrol, a state park, police from two neighboring towns, and officers from a state watershed conservancy district. One sheriff deputy totaled his car and was almost killed en route. Then, as some inconsistencies were uncovered, the whole deception unraveled.

You can imagine the anger and sense of betrayal in the “community” law enforcement feels among its members. Trust is broken. People are manipulated, all for one man's selfish ends.

Continuing Peter's list:

Hypocrisy– The Greek word means to act a part, hide behind a mask. And, we can't relate deeply to a mask, can we? So this destroys community.

Envy– This is not only hidden resentment over another's advantage, but wanting the same advantage for ourselves.

Slander– This is speaking evil of another. It is often disguised as “just passing on information” or even a prayer concern. But it is disparaging gossip designed to destroy one's confidence in another. The tongue can be a lethal weapon to the Christian community.

Peter calls us to strip off these destructive behaviors and “grow up in your salvation.” These sins are especially harmful to what God is wanting the church to be. So, we need to clean house.

In my youth, I had a lot of idealism about what the church should be. I could be rather contemptuous of the hypocrisy I saw in people. At times I was highly critical of inept leadership or mediocre sermons. I often found the church an embarrassment to me. I went into the ministry with some pretty clear ideas of what was needed to turn things around in the church. Many of those ideas were frustrated by reality. Those first couple of years as a pastor were ones of coming to grips with my naivete and letting go of how I thought it should be. As Eugene reminded us, “The church is God’s thing, not yours.” Let me just say, I have a lot more sympathy for the church's failures now that I am contributing to them.

Here's a question to ask yourself when you're feeling critical of the church: "What would the church look like if every member were just like me?" Most of us have enough to work on in our own spiritual life without being concerned about everyone else's. I came across a cute little poem called, My Name is Legion, in which Edward Sanford Martin pictured himself with devastating honesty:

*Within my earthly temple there's a crowd.
There's one of us that's humble and one that's proud.
There's one that's brokenhearted for his sins,
Another one that's unrepentant, sits and grins.
There's one that loves his neighbor as himself
And one that cares for not but fame and pelf. [wealth]
For much corroding care I should be free,
If I could once determine which is me.*

That's us, isn't it? Our inner selves are complicated, bewildering, exciting, frustrating, and disappointing. And, it seems other people have a way of bringing out the worst.

Our American culture is schooled in independence— doing our own thing in our own way and our own time. I sometimes hear people say, "I can be a Christian without participating in the church!" Yes, it's possible, but not normal or the way it is meant to be. It is a little like:

- a soldier who won't join an army;
- or a football player who refuses to join a team.

You see, God has unmistakably called us to **be together** and form the church. This doesn't mean just a collection of individuals relating to God, but united **together**. It's His design, His way, and the way He works. And, ultimately, it is for our own good that we submit to serving and being together. Spiritual life that isn't formed in community has little value. It's as we are placed in this structure of “living stones” that we end up alongside boring and incompetent people as well as sinners whose sin is always a lot more obvious than our own. There we *really* learn the impossibility of truly loving as Christ loved and are forced to depend upon Him to fill our hearts with what's needed. Here we learn to let go of our wills and submit to His will. And we find we are healed as we let go of our masks and become vulnerable to others and open ourselves to receive their love.

CONCLUSION

Next Sunday, we'll continue this study, focusing more upon this incredible description of ministry Peter gives us in verses 9-12. This morning I want to leave you with this hope-filled concept of the church summarized in Eph. 2:22–

In Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

It is Christ's church totally. Yet, each of us has been called by God to be a part of this church– a living stone, placed where Christ chooses. As we accept that place, become involved, working in cooperation with others, miraculously we become a dwelling where God lives by His Spirit.